

Adolescent Girls' and Boys' Perceptions of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

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BILL REID: "Mythic Messengers", 1984
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Why understand boys' and girls' relationship experiences?

- Significant gap between boys' and girls' relationship experiences (Cameron et al, 2007)
- Boys focus on friendships while girls prioritize intimate relationships
- Understanding this gap important to facilitate educational interventions



What we know...

- Relationships during adolescence of crucial developmental significance
- Gender differences in perceptions of romantic relationships
- Boys find intimate communications challenging



What we know...

- Boys navigate masculine norms during adolescence
- Power and dominance associate with traditional masculine ideology
- Traditional masculinity associate with negative relationships



What we know...

- Teens, and especially girls influenced by popular media
- Adolescents request support for relational skills



Current Study

To understand the processes teens use to navigate romantic relationships:

- Two focused discussion groups
- Explored relationship experiences, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes



Participants

- Rural middle- to working-class Euro-Canadian New Brunswick students
- Grades 9 through 12
- First sessions: 8 gender- and grade-segregated groups
- Second session: 2 follow-up groups, one male, the other, female



Method

- Short skit, introduction, discussion ground rules
- First session (50 minutes)
- Discussion points:
 - Important factors for managing dating relationships
 - Actions that create healthy/unhealthy relationships
 - Observations of dating relationships
 - Views about media effects



Method, continued

- Second session (3 months later)
- Discussion points:
 - How do boys and girls make sacrifices in relationships?
 - How do boys respond to conflict in relationships?
 - Do girls and boys solve relationship issues differently?



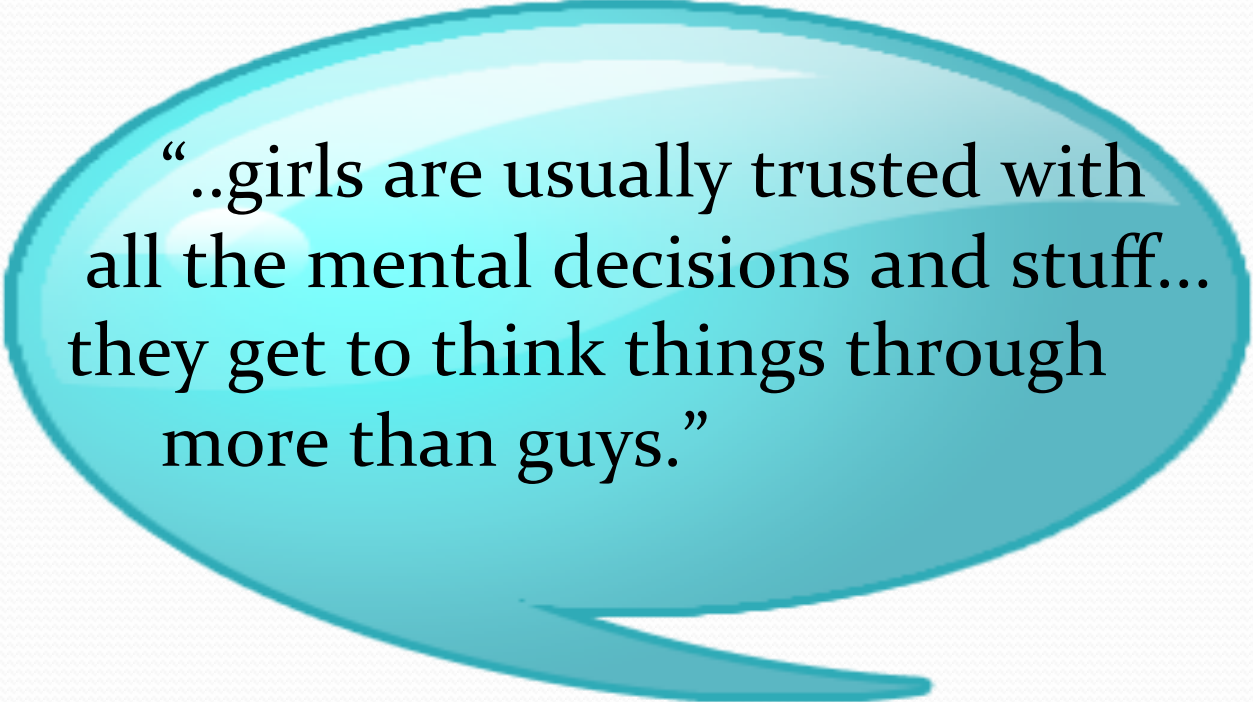
Theoretical Analysis

- Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theoretical model
- Clusters of concepts and categories developed
- Axial coding links categories to subcategories

Findings with the boys...

Central category:

- Struggling with gender expectations



“..girls are usually trusted with all the mental decisions and stuff... they get to think things through more than guys.”

Findings...

- Category 1: Determining responsibility

“...it’s not so much taking care of the other person, it’s taking care of yourself and the things you do.”

- Category 2: Keeping it in/letting it out

“Guys don’t like to talk about their problems.”
“...girls like to talk about a lot of stuff, but I find that it doesn’t really get anywhere.”

Findings...

- Category 3: Standing up for oneself

“...feel that women can be [abused] because they are not as strong and they can be taken advantage of.”

- Category 4: Making sacrifices

“Guys...never talk about their feelings, ever... but guys, they always need to listen to how the girl's feeling...we need to sacrifice our brains.”

Findings...

- Category 5: Building trust/not trusting

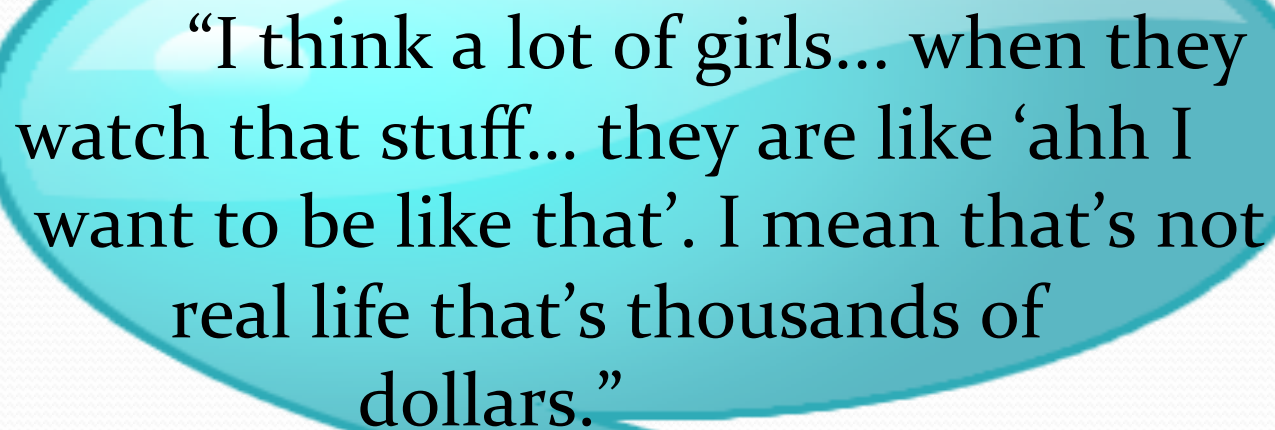
“If you can start out and build your relationship on trust you can keep it in place. If trust isn’t there you’re not going anywhere.”

- Category 6: Showing respect/showing disrespect

“They have ideas so respect them, don’t think, ‘ahh that’s stupid’. You should treat them well... Really respect them.”

Findings...

- Contextual Condition
 - Media Influences



“I think a lot of girls... when they watch that stuff... they are like ‘ahh I want to be like that’. I mean that’s not real life that’s thousands of dollars.”



Reflections...

- Developed theory of relationship processes (Luft, et al., 2012)
- Gender expectations and lack of skills contribute to knowledge and practice gaps
- Boys believe they take responsibility for themselves; girls assume more relational responsibilities



Reflections...

- Girls' prioritizing communication intimidates boys who find communication challenging
- Boys' assumption that standing up for oneself, means protecting other 'weaker' people (physically) reflects gender norms



Reflections...

- While boys assert trust is essential, lack of communication skills complicates trust building
- Boys say respect is foundational, yet-struggle with boundaries and applications



Reflections...

- Attitudinal interventions: gender-sensitive media analysis (e.g., Jhally, 2007)
- Relational skill-building interventions:
 - Reduce hyper-masculine ideals
 - Complementary reduction of hyper-feminine orientations (over talking, over nurturing, under self-evaluations)



Conclusion

- Boys and girls request assistance gaining healthy relationship skills:
 - Support that reduces negative gender expectations
 - And that empowers adolescents to use healthy relational skills



References

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Bill Reid: “this work was inspired by a device often used by Haida artists, an exchange of tongues, whereby power was communicated from one mythic creature to another. At a deeper level, the power of these old forms, born of a mythological past, reinterpreted through new materials and techniques, in a contemporary setting, can still speak to us across time, space, and enormous cultural differences.”

From left to right, the mythic creatures -- clutching, hanging on with the mouth, and squeezed in curious positions -- are:

- The Bear family, a human woman married to the Bear Prince, and their twin cubs
- Nanasimget, his wife, and her Killer Whale abductor
- The Sea Wolf who kills and devours three whales a day
- The Dogfish Woman and her mythic dogfish
- The Eagle Prince

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